



# The Drowned Cities

*Paolo Bacigalupi*

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## **The Drowned Cities** Paolo Bacigalupi

*Soldier boys emerged from the darkness. Guns gleamed dully. Bullet bandoliers and scars draped their bare chests. Ugly brands scored their faces. She knew why these soldier boys had come. She knew what they sought, and she knew, too, that if they found it, her best friend would surely die.*

In a dark future America where violence, terror, and grief touch everyone, young refugees Mahlia and Mouse have managed to leave behind the war-torn lands of the Drowned Cities by escaping into the jungle outskirts. But when they discover a wounded half-man--a bioengineered war beast named Tool--who is being hunted by a vengeful band of soldiers, their fragile existence quickly collapses. One is taken prisoner by merciless soldier boys, and the other is faced with an impossible decision: Risk everything to save a friend, or flee to a place where freedom might finally be possible.

This thrilling companion to Paolo Bacigalupi's highly acclaimed *Ship Breaker* is a haunting and powerful story of loyalty, survival, and heart-pounding adventure.

## **The Drowned Cities Details**

Date : Published May 1st 2012 by Little, Brown Books for Young Readers

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Author : Paolo Bacigalupi

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# From Reader Review The Drowned Cities for online ebook

## Paul says

Actual rating: 4.5 stars.

The physical world is oppressively present in Bacigalupi's fiction, as it is in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels (*Oryx and Crake*; *The Year of the Flood*): a world changed for the worse by global warming, with island nations wiped out and coastal areas no longer habitable; a world further ruined by human shortsightedness, where genetically engineered plant viruses introduced into the environment by agricultural conglomerates in order to wipe out competitors' crops have made grain more valuable than oil; a world where warlords use child soldiers to fight over salvage rights in the ruins of once-great cities. And yet there are hints that somewhere in the world pockets of educated and wealthy civilization remain, and Bacigalupi's outcast children -- yes, much of his writing is directed at a young adult audience -- see that promise as their city on the hill, and try to escape their desperate circumstances.

Katniss, you pussy, you have it easy compared to Mahlia and Mouse. At least Panem has a government. Imagine Joseph Kony and an army of drugged boys occupying half of what was once Washington DC, now partially submerged in the Atlantic, with only the upper floors of buildings rising above the brackish water. Imagine the Taliban occupying what remains. Imagine being a child in such an environment, abandoned, outcast, potential prey for human enemies, not to mention the genetically engineered coywolves running about and hunting in packs.

I really should list this as a banned book and beat the rush, because when the helicopter parents who have challenged *Lord of the Flies* and *The Hunger Games* see the darkness here, they will surely put *The Drowned Cities* on their target list. Dark? Black ... and yet there is a ray of hope, if you squint hard enough, and the implicit promise of sequels.

And what a story! Like most good YA novels, this one will have you on the edge of your seat from beginning to end. It is pure hair-raising yarn, with action that never stops. I swear, I was panting by the end. Paolo Bacigalupi is wicked good.

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## Nancy says

### Posted at Shelf Inflicted

Being unemployed can be nice. It's been a long time since I've been able to read a book all the way through, barely stopping for meals or a drink. Since this was such a page-turner, I surely would have been late to work or missed an appointment.

Though this is the sequel to *Ship Breaker*, there is a different set of characters. Mahlia and Mouse are two young refugees who fled their home to escape the terrible violence going on in the *Drowned Cities*. Now they are in the care of Dr. Mahfouz, a man with a peaceful heart whose life is devoted to caring for others. Mahlia is invaluable as the doctor's assistant, despite her lack of a right hand which was chopped off by the Army of God. Though they have a good life with the doctor, they are still outsiders, constantly reminded of the fact they are "castoffs" or "war maggots."

Their lives change drastically when they discover the severely wounded Tool, who is a “half-man” engineered for war. Part tiger, part hyena, part dog, and part man, Tool has exceptional strength and endurance. He also has retained human characteristics, which makes him a really fascinating character.

Once Tool receives the antibiotics he needs to survive, the doctor decides to return to the village which is now overrun with soldiers and Mahlia has a choice to return to her village or to flee with Tool. Mouse returns to the village and finds his life is irrevocably changed, as he is armed, branded and now a soldier. Mahlia is strong, brave, determined and risks her life and safety to get Mouse back.

This story is not as action-packed as the first, but the character development is much stronger and the story is considerably darker. It explores the physical and psychological effects of war – on children, families, communities and infrastructure.

It is brutal, harrowing, sad, frightening, and humane. It lacked the fun and adventure of Ship Breaker, but I was absorbed into the story instantly and unable to stop reading until I was done.

Because of the graphic situations, I would recommend this to older teens.

I love Bacigalupi’s writing and can’t wait to read his adult books!

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## **Nancy says**

There is a small country in West Africa called Sierra Leone which is rich in diamonds. In 1991 a civil war erupted and left the small country in a blood bath. No home was safe. Families and friends meant nothing to many. Common practices for recruiting soldiers were to kidnap boys at the appropriate age, drug them until addicted, then keep them semi-drugged while they committed their first atrocities. They were then addicted to narcotics they could only acquire through soldiering and their neuro-pathways had been rerouted with the violence they had inflicted.

Mariama Kallom was a teenager in 1992 in Sierra Leone. Her brother was abducted and the brainwashing failed as he refused to take part in the violence. He was eliminated. Mariama and her sister were hiding in a house when the rebels arrived in their town. There was not time to run. They were dragged outside, raped, then systematically the soldiers cut off the women's legs. As the machete was raised to cut off her own legs, the Red Cross arrived. The rebels fled and she alone had two legs.

I tell this story to prepare you for this book. The story is reminiscent of the civil war in Sierra Leone. The violence is extreme. The ice caps have melted and there is no clear leadership. Different factions are trying to take control for idealistic reasons. The soldiers are young, ill-prepared and trained through combat alone. Civilians are tools and the world now includes creatures engineered by splicing DNA. The book is really about Tool, a DNA enhanced creature we met earlier in Shipwrecker. It is also about Mahlia, the one handed cast-off who would have had no hands if her friend, Mouse, hadn't saved her.

The world presented is dark, depressing, cruel, violent and unpredictable. What I described of Sierra Leone is true. What is described in this story is disturbingly similar. Be prepared. That's all I'm saying.

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## Pamela says

My memory may be imperfect, and I may not be remembering *Ship Breaker* properly, but *The Drowned Cities* felt so much weaker, more conventional, and less engaging than its predecessor. It's set in the same world, and I think some of the characters cross over (at least one of them does, I'm pretty sure) but I felt lost and disoriented in this area of the brave, wet new world the author has envisioned.

While *Ship Breaker* took place around the Gulf Coast, here we've moved up north to what the people call "The Drowned Cities"--which are evidently Washington, D.C. and its environs. I assume NYC is included as well, but this book concerns itself with D.C. However, I don't think I would have been able to figure that out had it not been for the cover and the mention of being close to Alexandria. The characters move through the ruins of the East Coast, now covered in jungle vines and full of soldiers. I have really no idea who these soldiers are or what they want--if it was explained in the earlier book, I don't remember, and I think that if an author does a series, he or she should at least drop a few hints about what's been going on. I didn't feel that strong sense of place that was so present in *Ship Breaker*.

The characters here are generally all on the "unlikeable" spectrum (except for the augment, Tool), ranging from "annoying" to "vile." We have two protagonist-ish people, with a third one tossed in there from time to time. I didn't like any of them. Now, that's obviously not a requirement for liking a book--I've read books where the characters are unlikeable and yet I liked the book. But here ... it just feels so shallow, somehow. And even the likeable (-ish) character of Tool was used in such a way as to feel hackneyed and convenient--I think another Goodreads user used the term "deus ex machina," which applies, I think.

Another major issue I had with this, is that it felt like Bacigalupi wrote an adult novel, took out most of the sex, and made his characters young in order to appeal to a YA audience. The violence level was pretty much off-the-charts gratuitous, complete with ritual heart-eating (would that be cardiophagy???) and all sorts of goodies. Bacigalupi glosses over rape, although it is mentioned, but repeatedly has characters discussing how another will get his p\*\*\*k red with blood with his first kill. Um. Look, I know people talk like that, but this dialogue felt forced. Like, oooh, how edgy!

I suppose I'd read another in the series, but would definitely prefer it if it focused more on the events of the first book. Also less heart eating would be much appreciated, thanks.

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## Annie says

I've had plenty of time to mull over this book and my review, and yet...I still can't quite find words for it. There's just something about this novel, something about the way it just sucks you in, that it's hard to write about. Let's start out, then, with some things about it that are concrete.

The futuristic, dystopian setting is fabulous. It's dark and gritty. It's incredibly believable in a way that is unnerving. As I wrote in my review of *Ship Breaker*, it "took those mediocre dystopian *The Giver* ripoffs and ate them for breakfast". (Rereading the SB review, I realized that I was in an odd mood when I wrote that. "I could smell the...stuff that didn't smell good"? What? LOL. Carry on.) You know, those dystopian books that are everywhere, the ones that look so unique and enticing but once you pick them up, you realize you've read

the same thing before. You know this setting from somewhere, because it's basically the same setting every mediocre dystopian novel has.

If you enjoy that kind of setting, don't you dare pick up *The Drowned Cities*. TDC is not like that. The setting is unique and scary and awesome. And the rest of the book is nothing like those other mediocre dystopians, either. The characters are wonderful and lovable and utterly real. When I realized that Nailer wasn't in this book at all, I was very disappointed. I loved Nailer. The only character that SB and TDC have in common is Tool, actually (someone's name is Tool? What? Yeah, if you weren't interested before, you should be now). But Bacigalupi\* makes up for this with Mahlia and Mouse. Each of them were compelling, beautifully developed characters with exciting stories.

My only complaint with this book is the plot, actually. Despite the awesome characters, the story moved a bit slow at the beginning. I kept waiting for it to pick up, and it took a little too long. Luckily the rest of the book was awesome enough that I can forgive it.

And now I have to write, somehow, about the harder parts of this book. About the sheer harshness of the world, the characters, the themes. There is violence in this book. Quite a bit of it. This is by no means an easy book to read. It's tough. It puts characters in impossible, horrible situations, and you're glad to be safe at home. And then you realize...it isn't that far from reality. Child soldiers have been a major topic as of late, and this book fits right in with that.

I think Bacigalupi was going for quite a bit of shock value with this book, much more so than *Ship Breaker*. It worked, too. But none of the intensity, none of the violence, felt thrown in just for the sake of it. Everything was deliberate, and I admire Bacigalupi for that.

And then there's the last part of the book. The death at the very end. You guys who have read the book...you know exactly what I'm talking about. I'm still reeling from it, still asking "Bacigalupi, how could you?" The thing about it is that the author made us care so much that we feel such emotion from this death, and again, I admire him for it.

This is an awesome book, guys. Read it. Recommended for fans of dystopian novels, or gritty novels, or basically anything that makes you think and feel.

\*Like I said last time: And I thought Paolini was fun to say.?

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## Jacqie says

I'll read pretty much anything by this author at this point. *Drowned Cities* takes place in the same world as *Shipbreaker*, but there are no crossover characters except Tool. Tool is pretty damn cool, and I want more about him. Hard to tell whether this came before or after *Shipbreaker* timeline-wise.

Our main character is Mahlia. Her father was Chinese military who came to the *Drowned Cities* (near Washington DC after flooding destroyed much of it) to try to stop the collapse of American society into tribalism and civil war. The Chinese failed in that task, and Mahlia is a "cast-off", one of the family members left behind in a Saigon when the Chinese got out in a hurry. She's hard and struggling to survive in a refugee village in the jungle with her friend Mouse. Her benefactor is a doctor who helped save her life after a paramilitary unit cut off her hand.

Sound much like YA so far? This story could easily have been marketed for adults-only: the author doesn't pull many punches. In fact, one of the few concessions he makes is allowing Tool and Mahlia to have any relationship at all- it's likely that in this grim world, he would have killed her without thinking about it. I used to live near DC, and the way he wrote the ruined, looted city hurt my heart.

This story is another examination of morality- when is it right to fight for others, and when do you save yourself? I'm not sure the question was answered to my satisfaction. It's also an indictment of the futility of war and partisanship. Ideals vs. greed. Lots to chew on here, quite an achievement.

The only critique I've got is the plot doesn't give a lot of time for set-up- things happen quickly. I could have used more book in order to explore these issues more thoroughly. Develop relationships, expand upon conflicts. I wonder a bit why the author is sticking with YA when clearly these issues could have been written more deeply, although he accomplishes a lot. I'm pretty sure it's got to do with a 3 book contract for this series. I hope he has time to write other things, too.

More, please!

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## **Suzanne says**

Rarely does a sequel stand up beside an outstanding first book in a series and equal its quality and intensity, but this one does and more: *DROWNED CITIES* is actually better than *SHIPBREAKER* in two important ways. It maintains a breakneck speed of narrative momentum without losing fantastic characterization and writing. And even more: it requires less investment and time to get caught up than the original novel did, and because the world is the same, but the characters are different—all except Tool—even someone unfamiliar with the first novel can (and should) read this one. And what a character he is: half-man, dogface, hybrid of supercharged human DNA with hyena, tiger, and more. A seething mass of organic war machine whose escape from captors and seemingly certain death explode across the opening chapters.

Soon, though, we meet Mahlia, a “castoff,” left behind when her Chinese general peacekeeper father left her and her mother behind when the Drowned Cities and much of what’s left of the eastern seaboard of the United States falls into anarchy after global warming and the end of petroleum supplies help cast darkness over the land. Warlord armies pushed back during the reign of the peacekeeper soon take over and the “civvies” learn to cower and change allegiances to survive as best they can. Mahlia can’t hide her Chinese eyes and escapes with her lucky left hand after the Army of God soldiers claim her good right hand. Redheaded farmer boy turned scavenger Mouse saves her life that day, and the two of them find a home with Doctor Mahfouz in Banyon Town full of squats housing refugees on the border of jungle that has grown up in the swamps near the former Washington D.C., ground zero, the Drowned City. Mahfouz has come to rely on Mahlia’s to be his eyes and hands and has trained her in rudimentary medical skills.

When Tool stumbles close to Banyan Town, and the United People’s Front soldiers chase him there, Mahlia and Mouse collide with the bloody shrapnel of the Drowned Cities. No one emerges unscathed; all lose something in the breakneck sprint for survival in this brutal new world, so vividly rendered by Bacigalupi.

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## Stephanie says

Set in the same fallen world as "Ship Breakers", this book follows the story of Mahlia, a young girl left to survive on her own after the Chinese peacekeepers abandon their efforts to stop the fighting in what is left of the eastern seaboard of the USA, now called the Drowned Cities. Mahlia is what they call a cast-off, a child of a Chinese peacekeeper and a resident of the Drowned Cities. When her father is evacuated back to China, she and her mother are targeted by fanatical "patriots" for collaborating with the Chinese. Her mother is killed and Mahlia is left to survive by her own wits.

At some point she falls in the path of The Army of God, who capture her and cut off her right hand. They are about to do the same to her left when a disturbance distracts them and Mahlia escapes. The disturbance was created by a young boy called Mouse. Mouse's family members had been either killed or conscripted into whatever army attacked them. Mouse was the only survivor. He couldn't bear to see Mahlia being attacked without at least trying to save her. They end up together in a village called Banyan Tree, under the care of Dr. Mahfouz, a trained medical doctor and one of the last educated people in the crumbling remains of America.

All of the above just sets the scene for what happens to Mahlia and Mouse. I absolutely devoured this book. It was excellent, even better than Ship Breakers, in my opinion. I wonder if there will be other books set in this world?

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## Tatiana says

As seen on The Readventurer

The Drowned Cities' predecessor (and loose companion) Ship Breaker has already won Printz and was short-listed for National Book Award, and rightfully so. But I am wondering right now - was it not a tad premature to give Paolo Bacigalupi all these accolades? Because, frankly, The Drowned Cities is a far superior novel in comparison and, I guess, it is hard to expect similar acknowledgment of it, even if it is deserved? It appears, most of these awards are given once and the awarded authors are then promptly ignored? I wouldn't want this novel to be overlooked.

The Drowned Cities is a completely different story from Ship Breaker. Paolo's intent for Ship Breaker was to write a boy book, with action, adventure and explosions, and with a little bit of a moral lesson about bravery and loyalty. But I doubt The Drowned Cities was written with the same agenda in mind. Or if it was, the final novel far exceeded its original intent. The Drowned Cities is a heavy, brutal, unequivocally message-driven story that no one will dismiss as a simple entertainment.

This is a story of war. The kind of war that is playing out in many parts of our world right now. The setting of The Drowned Cities is futuristic/dystopian (slightly post-apocalyptic?) - natural resources are scarce, global warming has caused a climate change and extensive flooding of many parts of the planet, US is torn by civil war the reasons for which no one can any longer remember, China is a mega power that attempts to act as a peacekeeper, there are genetically augmented "people" who do rich men's bidding in all spheres of life from war combat to sexual services (this later "sphere" is not actually written into this YA novel, but a part of the larger The Windup Girl universe). But there is nothing in this fictional world that, on a human level, is not already happening in reality. And what is happening is that people are murdering each other for



no good reason, children are being recruited to advance various war lords' convoluted political and financial agendas, livelihoods are being destroyed and citizens killed and exploited by the same soldiers who claim to protect and serve them.

Bacigalupi writes about many war-related things in this novel - the futility of peacekeeping efforts, the pointlessness of civil wars. It raises questions of what should one do in a time of war - fight and spread violence? endure and survive at any cost, even by sacrificing one's humanity? or try to simply escape? But the major theme of *The Drowned Cities*, in my mind, is the place of children in war. They are its victims, they are its bloody players, they are its survivors. The part of the story that struck me the most is the portrayal of the evolution (or birth) of a child soldier. This novel is awfully reminiscent of Ishmael Beah's personal account of becoming a boy soldier. It is astonishing how easy it is to dehumanize a child and make him (or her) a senseless torturer and killer.

Reading *The Drowned Cities* was an immensely intense experience for me. Every time I put the book down and came back to it later, it only took me a few pages to put me again and again into a high level of anxiety and fear for its characters. Not many YA books can keep me in suspense these days, but *The Drowned Cities* did. With that said, I want to assure you, the book never becomes a tearjerker or tragedy porn or shocking for the shock's sake. It is an honest, real and raw portrayal of what happens every day in the countries we don't care and don't want to think about.

If *Mockingjay* or *Chaos Walking Trilogy* are your favorite reads, *The Drowned Cities* is your next natural reading choice.

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### **Nnedi says**

I thought this was fantastic. I love this kind of gritty, hard-hitting, fearless YA...well, I think it's YA. I don't know if it's YA. I don't care. It was a great read. It was a little explain-y but that was overshadowed by the wonderful characters and their plights. Good good stuff.

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### **Tfitoby says**

#### **It's like driving with the handbrake on.**

Paolo Bacigalupi is the Hugo and Nebula award winning author of one of my favourite all time books, *The Windup Girl*. It was for adults. It was brutal and dark and filled with the vision of a genius. The fact that he is choosing to waste his talent on writing for children upsets me.

*Drowned Cities* is a dystopian novel, filled with teenage characters fighting a multi-generational patriotic war that can never be won. His characters are simply trying to survive and in doing so might just change the fate of their people.

Arsene Wenger regularly refers to his Arsenal team as playing with the handbrake on when they are subdued and restrained in their beautiful passing game, unable to attack with full force and take the game by the throat. I believe the man is a certified genius and his wonderful metaphor for an underperforming football team could quite easily be applied to this book and Bacigalupi writing for kids. Sure he's writing for

intelligent teenagers here but at the end of the day he is still writing with the handbrake on; unable to unleash the full force of his imagination, showing restraint in not writing scenarios as brutally awful as he could (and the story in Drowned Cities really could use a few extra levels of grim) and by including a somewhat cheery denouement he is refusing to take the dystopian genre by the throat.

The Young Adult Discworld novels immediately spring to mind when reading this after reading his work for adults. On the surface it is the same, just with a larger font but underneath is where the faults can be found. There's no real depth to the plot, just a straightforward quest for survival. At least it takes place in a world created by Bacigalupi, one of his major strengths is establishing a real sense of place, of atmosphere and tension and the world of Drowned Cities is very definitely one of his. But as Tiffany Aching is no Granny Weatherwax, Mahlia is not on the same level as Emiko.

I read an interview with Bacigalupi somewhere in which he said he hated the feeling of having his writing be critiqued and that writing for the young adult market allowed him to work without that fear and whilst I understand his position, nobody likes to feel that they're doing a bad job, I can't respect him for it.

**As a good many intelligent people will not hesitate to inform you, if you drive with the handbrake on for long enough the wheels fall off the car.**

If you're 14 or looking for a book as a gift for an intelligent teenager I highly recommend this book but I will not be reading any more of Bacigalupi's works for kids myself until he writes another book for adults.

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## **Emily May says**

### **4.5**

Sometimes a book is just all that much better for being so disgustingly horrible. For not glossing over the gruesome details, for keeping the reader hooked in wide-eyed horror. This is that kind of book. The author doesn't waste his time on niceties, this story's about the harsh realities of survival and the unfortunate lengths that people have to go to in order to just stay alive. This book is nasty and gritty, and yet none of the violence and gore felt gratuitous, and above all else Paolo Bacigalupi is actually an incredible writer.

For those of you - like me - who felt that Ship Breaker was a little bit too much of a "boy book", despite being impressed by the writing and the imagery, I want to let you know that you should have no such concerns about The Drowned Cities. Not only is this a much better book than its predecessor, it has a broader reach. This, in my opinion, is about so much more than high-action scenes to please teen male readers, there are strong messages about war and loyalty and survival.

The story mainly focuses on three individuals, Mahlia, her companion Mouse, and a genetically engineered soldier which combines parts of various animals and human DNA to make the ultimate killing machine (called Tool). War plays a big part in this book, it is what threatens the safety of the characters, what forces them on, what challenges them to make a number of big decisions. Mahlia, with only a stump at the end of her right arm, is already a victim of this war. A war that is a lot more familiar to humanity than most of us would like to think.

To digress slightly, tomorrow I will be taking an exam in international relations and one of the key topics is what we call "new wars". These are a certain type of wars that have been on the rise for the last couple of

decades, the kind that sees new technology creating cheap and light weaponry that can be handled by children. Some of these children are five years old when they are recruited and forced to kill or be killed. The relevance? Mahlia and Mouse are children also caught up in a war, a war where the "soldier boys" are nothing but children with attitudes and big guns. Children who've been brainwashed into seeking cruelty and violence - because their only other option was to become a victim. The Drowned Cities may seem to be a futuristic/dystopian novel, but the war that the characters are facing is nothing that hasn't already happened in our world, nothing that isn't happening right now.

This is a very sad, honest tale of war, with particular emphasis on the effect it has on children. There are many questions being asked here that I think Paolo Bacigalupi wants us to seriously consider. It is so easy to forget that children are being forced into this kind of life through fear, not in a different world or dimension, not in a possible future, but right now across the globe. This is a much deeper and thought-provoking book than I imagined and I know I'll be thinking about it for quite some time.

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## **Jason says**

4.5 stars

What a great fun read. This book was almost as good as Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi. This is the second book in the series, but it revolves around an entirely different cast.

Mahilia and Mouse, two likable young adult protagonists gave this book a lot of feelings and heart. Unlike Ship Breaker this book was not as gloomy or filled with an overwhelming feeling of death and decay. Nailor, from the first book, had a much more difficult life and a far gloomier outlook on his future.

Tool, the augment and scary killer from the first book is the only character to return this one. The the plot, the scope and even the storyline on a whole is a much simpler one than in Ship Breaker. Mahilia and Mouse are victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mahilia is a young woman that is often persecuted as being a castoff of China, even though she was a child of the drowned cities. Her world at war leaves most of her family and friends all dead, cities in ruin, and people enslaved.

Like other Paolo Bacigalupi novels, Drowned Cities is a fast and incredibly enjoyable story that both adults and young adults will enjoy. I could read his novels every day. There is something raw and real about his end of the world scenarios that just touch you the right way and make you feel like there is still a glimmer of hope in humanity. His writing style is somewhat simple. He adds in the little details and some world building thereby creating a story that is rich and filled with the human spirit. I love that in this book, it turns out that Tool was more human than most of the soldiers and other side characters portrayed.

A simple passage that shows his style:

"She could look at the gun and see a history of hands that held it. Soldier after soldier, making it his own. Covering it with luck symbols and charms, Fates Eyes and crosses and whatever they thought would give them the edge.

And every one of them was dead."

If you haven't read Bacigalupi, and are a fan of dystopian type young adult novels, than his works should not be missed. For pure enjoyment Drowned Cities is five big stars. I am a huge fan.

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## Catie says

4 1/2 stars

Many of you (and I'm guessing possibly even the author himself) will laugh me off this small stage when I confess that I find Paolo Bacigalupi's novels to be incredibly hopeful. Seriously. Now, admittedly, this is an author who writes all about the end of the world as we know it and what we've done to bring ourselves here. *The Drowned Cities* is about the irrevocable loss of childhood innocence, the harsh realities of survival, and the grasping, selfish nature of humankind. His novels are not for everyone, and trust me when I say that they are *dark*.

And yet, somehow these dark, twisted, eerily prophetic tales make me feel lifted. Maybe it's because, set against such bleak settings, the hope stands out even more acutely. In the very harsh world of *The Drowned Cities*, it stands out in moments of sacrifice and resistance: in all the moments when these characters fight to rise out of the grim world they were born into. It's in the reckless bravery of one damaged child to save another. It's in the momentary resistance of one hardened teenage soldier to years of violence and trauma. It's in the deceptively foolish actions of a peaceful man. It's the strength within one born and bred killer to choose another path. These moments are brief and often fruitless, but they're powerful within the scope of a single life.

But that's not the entirety of it. It's hard for me to articulate this properly, but there's a certain much broader, more ambiguous hope that I think Paolo Bacigalupi paints so incredibly well. It's a hope that stems from our complete and utter insignificance. We crawl around this Earth, warring with each other and consuming every resource, leaving waste and pollution behind. And yet, the Earth goes on. The Earth finds ways to thrive despite us, because of us. It adapts. Even as we are molding this world into an incompatible home for ourselves, we are remaking it for something, someone else. We are so arrogant; we feel so separate, but the truth is that we aren't above nature. We are a part of it. We are a small piece of this powerful, wild system that can't ever be controlled. Even when we try to control it, it slips right out of our hands. We are such a miniscule, temporary part of this Earth's history. All we have is this one brief moment to live the best we can and to try our hardest not to be a part of the violence and destruction. And even if we fail, this world will go on without us, just as it has for millennia. For some reason, I find a lot of hope in that.

What do all of my ramblings about hope have to do with this book? *Everything*, says my addled brain. Or maybe nothing. Maybe you'll have an entirely different feeling, but I can almost guarantee that you'll feel something for this intense book and its characters. Just read it. If you don't trust me (understandable – this review is completely unhelpful), [click here](#) and let Tatiana's much more lucid words convince you.

### Perfect Musical Pairing

Nine Inch Nails - The Good Soldier

This is a very chilling song, told from the point of view of a soldier as he walks through his destroyed home, stepping over bodies and trying to convince himself that what he's doing is the right thing.

*"I am trying to see  
I am trying to believe*

*This is not where I should be  
I am trying to believe*

*Blood hardens in the sand  
Cold metal in my hand  
Hope you understand the way that things are gonna be  
There's nowhere left to hide, 'cause God is on our side  
I keep telling myself."*

Tatiana and I posted a joint review of this book on The Readventurer.

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## **Jamie says**

So, I thought Ship Breaker was as close to a perfect book as there could be. And I thought this book was fast paced and breathless and dramatic. But there were some things in this that have started to grow a bit tiresome for me.

One of the things i loved the most about Ship Breaker was the suspenseful way they discovered Nita. Thinking she is dead, beginning to rob her, only to have her come to life. I also liked the way that Nita was so nebulous - was she an innocent victim? Would saving her walk them into a trap?

Unfortunately, the "psych! Not really dead" happens a few too many times in Drowned Cities. (with Tool, with Mouse, with Ocho) In fact, when Mahfouz dies I wasn't even sad because I kept thinking in a minute.... "Psych! I'm not really dead."

I did enjoy the subplots, with the child soldiers, but unfortunately Ocho's transformation to hero was way too obvious, and some of the politics were handled kind of clunkily as well.

It's a great adventure story, but not a great literary book, like I truly considered Ship Breaker.

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## **Clouds says**

I've read 3 Bacigalupi books, and they've taken the maximum haul of 15 stars between them.

Why do I love his work so much? It's hard to say. He's bleak as f#ck - but he's also quite, quite, brilliant.

This is a sequel, but it's a new cast of characters set in the same world as Ship Breaker. It's a dystopian future: civilization in the USA has collapsed. The Chinese were peacekeepers, but even they've left now and the land is a torn-up mess of civil war, genocide and child-soldiers - rape and mutilation is a norm. They say this book is targeted at 'young adults', but I can't think of another y-a novel that pulls so few punches...

It reminded me of films set in African conflicts: Hotel Rwanda, Blood Diamond, The Last King of Scotland, Tsotsi... but also City of God.

It's like Bacigalupi saying to the Western world - "*you've seen on the news how f#cked up things can get - now stop taking what you've got for granted, because it's all built on a house of cards, and with one strong wind your whole world could come tumbling down.*"

It helps his moralising stance that the story itself is an awesome tale of bravery and loyalty, with some great 'real' kids as lead characters, and a kick-ass animal-human-hybrid super-soldier for the sci-fi edge :-). It's the kind of 110% page-turner that you'll want to blitz through in a single sitting and resent the world for interrupting.

My only complaint: the sequel isn't out yet. Give me more!

**After this I read:** The Neon Court

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## Misty says

One of my biggest selling points in any book is tension. I talk a lot in my reviews about tension, and generally it's because I'm talking about the lack of it. But what I mean when I talk about tension is a lot of things, actually. It's not just the internal tension in the story, between characters, say, or two factions. That's only part of it. When I'm talking about tension, I'm also talking about the way your gut reacts to a story. The best stories have tension you can actually *feel*. They cause an actual physical reaction inside of you, making you sit up straighter or curl in on yourself, feel butterflies or feel terror. They make your heart race or give you chills. They making reading a sensory experience, make you feel like you're more in the story. I could *feel* this story; the tension was *beautiful*.

This companion novel to *Ship Breaker*\* has a very dark and hopeless atmosphere and is almost unrelenting in that darkness except that there are these bright moments to balance it: trust, love, companionship, hope - things that somehow manage to live on against the odds in the face of child soldiers and fanaticism and all manner of unspeakable atrocities. Don't get me wrong, nothing here is sugar-coated; the story remains incredibly dark, but not so relentlessly grim that you just can't bear to read it.

And the storytelling - the writing and tactics and plot devices - were very well done. This is a great example of shifting narrators that actually worked for me. In the past, I've talked about how this can be hit or miss for me, but this time it was a big hit. It's also a great example of anti-heroic characters that work and that still remain sympathetic and rootforable. Bacigalupi juggles things well and shifts seamlessly, and weaves each character's storylines together to make them more meaningful than they would be on their own. There were so many things that I stopped to read over, not for clarity but for the sheer power of it. It was sometimes breathtaking, but not in the way of any kind of beauty, really. More in the way that a punch to the gut is breathtaking. I just sometimes had to set the book in my lap and just linger over some things, process them or prepare myself for what I knew was coming. I love a book that engages me on this level, because it's rare enough on its own, and rarer still to have that last the whole way through the book.

It's fascinating from the dystopian/post-apocalyptic aspect, and I think those who have gotten used to the watered-down dystopias and post-apocalyptic books flooding the market lately will appreciate the vitality of this. Everything felt very critical, very authentic and very tenuous, with that skin-crawling layer that comes with well thought out dystopias. Vital, truly disturbing dystopias rely on things that could happen and/or *do* happen, and intelligently distill a future of what *could* be from what *is*. Good dystopias/PAs give you glimpses of insight into where everything went wrong, and then how they kept going wrong, and they shock

your system with how easily it could all happen. Bacigalupi does this really well, sort of meditating on the choices we make and their snowball effects.

I don't know if there will be a third companion book, but there are loose ends in *The Drowned Cities* that could leave it open for one. I don't mention this as a drawback, however, as I think the loose ends were done in a good, believable way, and I like to have stories like this left up in the air a little bit. It gives something to discuss, something to think over and work out. This is not the type of book to have everything come together completely in the end, or to have a Happy Ever After for every character; it would have felt inauthentic if this had been the case, and a lot of the power of the story would have been lost as a result. As it is, the story is bittersweet, not bow-wrapped, and that's exactly as it should be.

\*Note: To my understanding, **The Drowned Cities** is a *loose* companion to **Ship Breaker**, so if you haven't read Ship Breaker don't let that stop you - it didn't stop me! And I never felt like I was missing anything or not comprehending the scope of things; it definitely works well as a stand-alone, but makes me even more excited for when I finally do read Ship Breaker... Also, this is marketed to YA but there's no real YAness about it. It's just a book, well-written and as such I think will appeal as much or more to adults as to the teens it's marketed to.

Curious about The Drowned Cities? Read the first 11 chapters here for free! I doubt you'll want to put it down...

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## Adam says

I was a little saddened after finishing *Wind Up Girl* and discovering that the Bacigalupi's next book was going to be a young adult. I find this an annoying trend of authors of complex, adult, and sophisticated speculative literature to chasing YA dollar. Teens have everything these days grumpy old me says, leave me my speculative fiction. So instead of rushing out and getting his next title I decided to wait and see. I got my hands on both *Ship Breaker* and its sequel/sidepiece *Drowned Cities* and read them in a couple of days. I can't endorse authors going YA (insert essay about our youth obsessed culture here), but if the results are this good, I won't complain (excited about *Railsea* by the way). He has created a full world in these pages, a grim vision of a possible future that is painfully believable. Taking dire speculation on oil and global warming but mixed with prophetic horrors of the developing world (visions of children living in garbage dumps in South America and India and the terrors of Sierra Leon's brutal civil war give these books resonance). The characters that fill this shattered, desiccated world are just as believable. The youth of the protagonists, the happy but uncertain endings, and the straight forward prose is the only concessions the authors makes towards fitting them into the YA mold. A lack of humor, subtlety, and over seriousness are some accusations with merit against these books, but I feel its tone is well earned. I smell a trilogy coming on (especially because of the character Tool) but I feel these books deserve a capstone. Everyone with well-thumbed copies of the *Hunger Games* needs to snatch these books up immediately, and *Wind Up Girl*. While the books are separate from the author's debut, the worlds and concerns are so similar it wouldn't be a stretched to place them as a singular unit.

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## Francesca Forrest says

(review duplicates what I posted on LJ)

I loved Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*, the story of Nailer, a boy who works stripping ancient oil tankers in a globally warmed futureworld, whose life changes when he and his friend Pima discover a shipwrecked luxury clipper. The world was vivid, and the characters were wonderful, so I was very excited to be entrusted with an advance copy of *The Drowned Cities*, which the publisher describes as a companion to *Ship Breaker*.

*The Drowned Cities* does share one character with *Ship Breaker* (Tool, a genetically engineered "half-man"), but it is a very different sort of story. Despite its bleak setting, I found *Ship Breaker* to be a very hopeful story. It was about, among other things, building families and establishing trust, and about people's ability to escape from what genetics or circumstance dictates is their lot in life. *The Drowned Cities*, by contrast, explores how no one in a war zone can escape the black-hole pull of the carnage. You think you have morals and ideals you would hold true to, no matter what? You think at the very least you'd protect your loved ones to the death? You concede that you might do some things to survive, but not other things? *The Drowned Cities* begs to differ.

The protagonists, Mahlia and Mouse, are younger than *Ship Breaker*'s Nailer, but their lives are an order of magnitude harsher—which is saying something. They live near drowned Washington DC, which has become the stomping grounds of regional militias reminiscent of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front and Uganda's terrifying Lord's Resistance Army, complete with child soldiers, civilian massacres, and amputations. Mahlia's the offspring of a long-gone Chinese peacekeeper father and a local mother (now dead) who made her living selling off the cultural patrimony of the former United States. Mouse is a war orphan.

The more you identify with Mahlia and Mouse—and Bacigalupi portrays them warmly and thoroughly, so it's easy to identify with them—the more inescapable your participation in the wartime horrors they experience (and create). It forces a kind of radical humility and empathy: there but for chance of birth go any of us.

Of course, universal as the human capacity for atrocity is, we are actually culturally specific in the ways we brutalize each other: Pol Pot's child soldiers aren't precisely interchangeable with Charles Taylor's, any more than the Armenian genocide is interchangeable with the Rwandan one, so really I suspect that warlord conflicts in a failed-state United States would have a somewhat less Sierra Leonean flavor than they do in *The Drowned Cities*, just as I suspect Chinese peacekeepers' encouraging posters would be more like the four-character political slogans we see in China today—things like "One Country, Two Systems" rather than "beat your swords into plowshares" and "only animals tear each other apart," which are among the examples given in *The Drowned Cities*.

Still, that's a quibble, and since part of Bacigalupi's intention is to make us identify with real-world conflicts that we'd like to distance ourselves from, I can accept the scenario he's created.

The story also contrasts actions based on abstract ideas with actions based on personal, human relationships. War is hell, and even personal, human relationships won't guarantee that you won't end up betraying someone or being betrayed, but action based on friendship and love is shown as infinitely superior to actions that are prompted by abstractions—even abstractions that we think of as good. Kindly Dr. Mahfouz, a pacifist doctor who has sheltered the children, is ruled by his ideals, but it means his sense of compassion stops abruptly when he's confronted with Tool, who, as a creature engineered for war, falls outside his moral framework. Mahlia, who's not encumbered by a moral framework, is able to respond to Tool as a person. Self-interest affects her actions, but that's not a bad thing, in the *Drowned Cities*.

What hope there is in *The Drowned Cities* comes from people recognizing one another's humanity and



reaching out to one another on a personal, individual level—rather than treating one another as members of some category: half-man, wartime castoff child, soldier boy. The relationships that Mouse and Mahlia have, at separate points in the story, with the youthful Sergeant Ocho are all about perceiving and fanning the humanity in one another. Seeing it happen makes you-the-reader stop and ponder what comprises humanity, what it means to be human, and what it means to love one another.

This is a harrowing book. It's not fun. But it's powerful, very, very thought-provoking, and, in the end, humane. Although no one is immune to degradation, no one is so low that they can't be lifted up, if someone reaches out a hand and if they're willing to take it. That's a profoundly hopeful truth to discover amid the horror, and I'm grateful for it. I'm very glad to have read *The Drowned Cities*, and I highly recommend it--just be prepared for what you're getting into.

**[Edited to add...]** *There are other things I wanted to say--things I especially liked (Mouse's transformation: that was one of the things that gripped me most in the book), things I had reservations about (Tool's character: he seemed less his own person in this and more a type than in Ship Breaker), and things I initially had reservations about but ended up liking (Dr. Mahfouz's decision referenced above; certain things about Mahlia). But you know, a review that covered \*\*all\*\* that would be really long. And it's hard to discuss any of this without causing spoilers, and since the book isn't out yet, those are an especial no-no. So here we are.*

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## George K. says

Η ιστορ?α του βιβλ?ου αυτ? διαδραματ?ζεται στον ?διο κ?σμο και περ?που την ?δια εποχ? με την ιστορ?α του βιβλ?ου "Νεκροταφε?α καρabi?v" που ε?ναι το πρ?το της σειρ?ς και που δι?βασα τον Ιο?νιο του 2014. ?μω? εδ? ?χουμε να κ?νουμε με μια καινο?ργια ιστορ?α, διαφορετικ? απ? την πρ?τη και αρκετ? ανεξ?ρτητη, εν? γνωρ?ζουμε και καινο?ργιους χαρακτ?ρες (εκτ?ς εν?ς, του μεταλλαμ?νου πλ?σματος ον?ματι Τουλ).

Βρισκ?μαστε στις παρηκμασμ?νες Ηνωμ?νες Πολιτε?ες, κ?που κοντ? στην Ου?σινγκτον, που πλ?ον ε?ναι μια π?λη βυθισμ?νη στο χ?ος αλλ? και το νερ?. Και αυτ? και ?λλες π?λεις τριγ?ρω λ?γονται Πνιγμ?νες Π?λεις. Σ'αυτ? το τοπ?ο θα γνωρ?σουμε την Μ?λια και τον Μ?ους, δυο χαμ?νια του πολ?μου που ζουν σε μια κοιν?τητα στην ζο?γκλα. Κ?ποια μ?ρα, σε μια εξ?ρμηση τους, θα βρουν μισοπεθαμ?νο ?να απερ?γραπτο πλ?σμα, ?να προ?ν βιοτεχνολογ?ας που δημιουργ?θηκε για να σκοτ?νει και να καταστρ?φει -τον Τουλ. Τ?τε ε?ναι που θ'αρχ?σει το πραγματικ? μπλ?ξιμο, γιατ? ο Τουλ μ?λις ε?χε αποδρ?σει απ? ?ναν τρελ? συνταγματ?ρχη. Και τα δυο χαμ?νια θα βρεθο?ν στην μ?ση εν?ς σκληρο? εμφυλ?ου πολ?μου στις Πνιγμ?νες Π?λεις, ?που οι περισσ?τεροι στρατι?τες ε?ναι ?φηβοι και μικρ? παιδι?...

?χουμε να κ?νουμε με μια πολ? δυνατ? και συναρπαστικ? περιπ?τεια επιστημονικ?ς φαντασ?ας, γεμ?τη με δρ?ση, β?α και σκληρ?ς εικ?νες. Δεν ε?ναι σαν κ?τι αφελ? νεανικ? δυστοπικ? μυθιστορ?ματα με ?να χαζορομ?ντζο στην μ?ση και πολλ?ς ωραιοποι?σεις. Εδ? ?χουμε π?νο, α?μα, μαυρ?λα και πρωταγωνιστ?ς νεαρο?ς εφ?βους που ?χουν δει και ζ?σει τα π?ντα. OK, η πλοκ? δεν κρ?βει καινο?ργια πρ?γματα στο ε?δος, απλ? ?χουμε κυνηγητ?, εκρ?ξεις, πυροβολισμο?ς, ηρωισμο?ς, και π?ει λ?γοντας. ?μω? ο Μπατσιγκαλο?πι ασχολε?ται με ?να πολ? σοβαρ? θ?μα, αυτ? των παιδι?v-στρατιωτ?v, αλλ? και του χ?ους και του π?νου που προκαλε?ται απ? ?ναν (οποιοδ?ποτε) π?λεμο. Η γραφ? ε?ναι πολ? καλ?, ?κρως ευκολοδι?βαστη και εθιστικ?, με ρεαλιστικ?ς περιγραφ?ς των σκην?v δρ?σης και των τοπ?ων. Η ατμ?σφαιρα αρκετ? σκοτειν?.

Γενικ? πρ?κειται για ?να πολ? καλ?, δυνατ? και σκληρ? δυστοπικ? μυθιστ?ρημα, με ενδιαφ?ρουσα κοσμοπλασ?α και μουντ? ατμ?σφαιρα, που ναι μεν απευθ?νεται κατ? κ?ριο λ?γο σε εφ?βους, ?μως μπορε? να διαβαστε? μια χαρ? και απ? μεγ?λους. Αν και σαν ιστορ?α διαβ?ζεται ανεξ?ρτητα, προτε?νω να διαβ?σετε πρ?τα το "Νεκροταφε?α καρabi?v" αν θ?λετε να γνωρ?σετε αυτ? την σειρ?. Και τα δυο βιβλ?α ε?ναι πολ? ωρα?α και συναρπαστικ? και πιστε?ω ?τι αξ?ζουν μια ματι?.

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